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Waiting for the Mail

The settlers had expected the mail for days, sometimes weeks. At last it arrived. The mail carrier, tired and shaken from his long ride, was welcomed, and the exasperating delay was momentarily overlooked as the messages, conveyed in letters dated several weeks earlier, were eagerly read for "news" of friends and relatives back East.

The "celerity, certainty, and security" of the mails, although imposed as an obligation upon all who were in the postal service, was not always realized. Settlers, far separated from their earlier homes, found the irregularity of the mails a matter of considerable hardship. Complaints and petitions for better service were frequently made public.

As early as 1838 the citizens of Dubuque showed their discontent with conditions in this respect. At a public meeting a committee was appointed to petition Congress for specific improvements in mail facilities. Almost twenty years later the *Keokuk Gate City* commented on the "miserable" service: "The receipt of one mail in four days at this season of the year is an outrageous

imposition on the community. It is a state of things that no man would tolerate in any ordinary business. . . . It is an insult to tell us that mail can not be brought forty miles oftener than once in four days — or that more than one failure need occur in succession. There is no excuse for this treatment of the public."

The irregularity of the mail service could usually be attributed to a number of circumstances. Newspaper editors illustrated with graphic accounts. Faulty and careless handling of the mail played a part. In 1836 the *Dubuque Visitor* declared that according to the contract mail was to be conveyed three times a week between Galena, Dubuque, and Peru. But, said the editor, "the mail that was due on Wednesday last came the next day and the carrier, fatigued with his extraordinary exertion, leaving his mail bag in town, took a small jaunt into the country by way of recreation and did not return until the next day. . . . The mail was due again on Sunday, but the carrier being probably conscientiously opposed to traveling on that day, it did not come until brought by a steamboat passenger on Monday. . . . Not infrequently in order to have an easy trip, [it] is retained at Galena for the arrival of a steamboat; and sometimes to save trouble and expense, waits till next time." A Dubuque editor

also related how on one occasion the postmaster after waiting some hours for the mail to be brought from the steamer to the postoffice, was compelled to take the mail from the steamboat himself in order to prevent it being carried on to Prairie du Chien. He finally found it on the boiler deck, in charge of no one in particular.

The delay may have started in the eastern States, where the burden of transportation was heavier. The Postmaster General reported in 1841 that he had frequently been addressed by postmasters and others concerning the irregularity of the mails. He suggested that considerable improvement in the service would be gained if the carriers, who claimed the right under their contract to carry three passengers on the mail stage, would not be permitted to carry passengers if the mails required the whole coach.

Contributing to some extent to the inefficiency were the awkward arrangements for mail distribution. An editor pointed out that, since Keokuk was chosen for the distributing point for all mail from the East, mail which passed through Burlington first went on to Keokuk to be "distributed" and was then sent back to Burlington.

But instances of this kind and of carelessness were apparently far less often the cause for delay than the unavoidable hindrances imposed by the

weather. Storms, deep snow, high water, and poor roads were seldom absent all at one time. The mud on a post road in the fifties was described as "thick as dough and greasy at the same time. The horses would slip up and the wheels slide fearfully at every inclination of the road, and whenever we got out to walk it seemed as though we lifted a common sized farm at every step." Travelers on the stage journey from Galena to Saint Louis were warned not to attempt the trip unless prepared to walk half the distance and carry a fence rail the rest of the way.

The people in Franklin County suffered the delays of the mails for a long time. One of the first lines to be established in the county was that between Cedar Falls and Hampton in the middle fifties. But even after the establishment of the weekly service, the stagecoach carrying the mail was occasionally awaited for weeks at a time.

Impatient to hear word of the events of the war in 1861 (Did the *Star of the West* get provisions to Sumter?), Hampton people had to wait nearly seven weeks. At one time the "snow was deep, and the mail agent would not venture out. Mr. Owens . . . walked 50 miles — from Iowa Falls to that place — on snow shoes, and carried the mail on his back." The Franklin County *Record* expressed its opinion in a woodcut, repre-

senting the mail stage as a turtle hitched to a sled that on its covered top had the words, "From Cedar Falls to Hampton".

In 1840, a traveler, riding on the Dubuque and Garnavillo mail line of stages, a distance of forty miles, said the trip was made in a little more than six hours, stopping six times to change the mail, and three-quarters of an hour to dine.

Vindicating the Western Stage Company against the "raking down" which it was receiving for its slow service, a Polk County newspaper editor wrote: "The Company, we think, deserves the praise of the people of Iowa for its indomitable perseverance in ploughing through snow, rain, sleet and mud for the past eight months, imperiling the lives of their drivers and teams in crossing swollen streams to accommodate the traveling public and deliver the mails at the post office. . . . We believe the company has done more to forward the mails and passengers than the public could reasonably expect at their hands, taking into consideration the awful condition of the roads." The *Muscatine Democratic Enquirer*, too, praised the "enterprise and liberality" of J. Frink, of the Frink, Walker & Company's stages, as the "head of mail contractors" in seeking to improve the service.

Between the beginning of settlement and the

coming of the railroads west of the Mississippi, mail facilities on the whole improved as immigration continued to expand the nuclear communities. Although better mail service often awaited the growth of settlement, immigration was in turn stimulated by better means of communication. A town that could advertise frequent mail delivery had a distinct advantage in attracting settlers.

According to postal regulations, mail was conveyed from the nearest postoffice on any established post road to the courthouse of any county which was then without mail facilities. To a gentleman in Davis County, who in the early forties sought to get a postoffice established near his claim, Augustus Caesar Dodge, Delegate in Congress, gave the following advice: "My object then is to say to you, fix your county seat; to it the mail will have to go; and then petition Congress for the other routes which you desire in and through your county. You will send these petitions to me, and I will endeavor to have such routes established as will afford to Davis and Appanoose counties the mail facilities to which they are entitled." George W. Jones, the first representative of the Iowa country in Congress, urged the people to propose the construction of new post roads to gain the necessary advantages in postal services.

By the middle eighteen fifties a network of post roads brought the mail to many parts of the State. The United States Postmaster General's report for the year ending in June, 1855, showed that there were 6265 miles of post routes in Iowa, of which 1185 miles were by stagecoach service. The mode of conveying the mail for the balance of the mileage was not specified, but included horseback, hacks, or various other vehicles. The mileage by way of steamboat was given as 150 miles. Although the routes in mileage aggregated 6265, the total transportation of mail in Iowa for the year was 1,313,372 miles, at a cost to the government of \$90,705.

Contracts for carrying the mail were let to the lowest bidder. In 1855 fifty-two major routes, and twenty additional routes comprising only a few miles, were submitted for competitive bids. Of the fifty-two contracts, thirty-nine were for weekly service, back and forth; four were bi-weekly; seven, triweekly; and two routes, from Keosauqua to Fairfield and from Iowa City to Muscatine, were for six round trips each week. On the western border of the State, a triweekly mail contract was let between Council Bluffs and Sioux City over a distance of one hundred miles. The longest trip in the contracts granted in 1855 was that between Dubuque and Sergeant's Bluff,

325 miles across the State, established as a weekly mail.

In 1854 the Postmaster General was directed to establish a mail route on the Mississippi River from Keokuk to Galena. This seems to have been only partially accomplished, for in the report of the following year the transportation of the mail by steamboat was indicated as between Keokuk and Rock Island, running six times a week. The steamboat company received \$25 for each trip.

Regular schedules were prescribed. The mail coach leaving Iowa City destined for Fort Des Moines, for example, left at four o'clock in the morning and was due at the latter postoffice at eight P. M. the following day. The mail from Dubuque to Muscatine, over an eighty-eight-mile route, left at six A. M. each week on Tuesday and arrived at six P. M. on Thursday. The distance of thirty miles between Independence and Cedar Falls was made in one day, from seven in the morning until six o'clock in the evening.

The railroads, first coming to the Mississippi in the middle fifties, altered the problem of mail carriage. This more expeditious means of transportation was utilized at once, and as the railroad lines progressed westward, the stagecoach drivers gradually ceased bidding for the renewal of their contracts to carry the mails. Immigration gained

momentum, and the new settlements were cheered by the promise of better communications with the East. Those in the service of the Post Office Department were still under obligation for "celerity, certainty, and security" in handling the mails. In many instances the railroads, still primitive in equipment, were less dependable than the stage and steamboat.

Good railroad connections could not be established immediately. The *Anamosa Eureka* in the early sixties remarked upon the changed conditions: "So it is probable that the Federal troops have won a great victory somewhere, but we . . . will have to wait until next week, probably, before we learn the particulars. Oh," cried the editor, "Oh for the good old times when we had a daily stage instead of a bare railroad track!"

MARIE HAEFNER